

1921: The Kronstadt rebellion



The history of the rising of the naval town of Kronstadt in Russia by workers and sailors supporting the original aims of the 1917 Revolution against the new Bolshevik dictatorship. The rebellion was crushed by Red Army troops under Trotsky's command.

The Kronstadt rebellion took place in the first weeks of March, 1921. Kronstadt was (and is) a naval fortress on an island in the Gulf of Finland. Traditionally, it has served as the base of the Russian Baltic Fleet and to guard the approaches to the city of St. Petersburg (which during the first world war was re-named Petrograd, then later Leningrad, and is now St. Petersburg again) thirty-five miles away.

The Kronstadt sailors had been in the vanguard of the revolutionary events of 1905 and 1917. In 1917, Trotsky called them the "pride and glory of the Russian Revolution." The inhabitants of Kronstadt had been early supporters and practitioners of soviet power, forming a free commune in 1917 which was relatively independent of the authorities. In the words of Israel Getzler, an expert on Kronstadt:

"It was in its commune-like self-government that Real Kronstadt really came into its own, realising the radical, democratic and egalitarian aspirations of its garrison and working people, their insatiable appetite for social recognition, political activity and public debate, their pent up yearning for education, integration and community. Almost overnight, the ship's crews, the naval and military units and the workers created and practised a direct democracy of base assemblies and committees."

In the centre of the fortress an enormous public square served as a popular forum holding as many as 30,000 persons.

The Russian Civil War had ended in Western Russia in November 1920 with the defeat of General Wrangel in the Crimea. All across Russia popular protests were erupting in the countryside and in the towns and cities. Peasant uprisings were occurring against the Communist Party policy of grain requisitioning. In urban areas, a wave of spontaneous strikes occurred and in late February a near general strike broke out in Petrograd.

On February 26th 1921, in response to these events in Petrograd, the crews of the battleships Petropavlovsk and Sevastopol held an emergency meeting and agreed to send a delegation to the city to investigate and report back on the ongoing strike movement. On their return two



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"it was in its commune-like self-government that Red Kronstadt really came into its own, realising the radical, democratic and egalitarian aspirations of its garrison and working people, their insatiable appetite for social recognition, political activity and public debate, their pent up yearning for education, integration and community. Almost overnight, the ship's crews, the naval and

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days later, the delegates informed their fellow sailors of the strikes (with which they had full sympathy with) and the government repression directed against them. Those present at this meeting on the Petropavlovsk then approved a resolution which raised 15 demands which included free elections to the soviets, freedom of speech, press, assembly and organisation to workers, peasants, anarchists and left-socialists. Like the Petrograd workers, the Kronstadt sailors also demanded the equalisation of wages and the end of roadblock detachments restricting travel and the ability of workers to bring food into the city.

A mass meeting of fifteen to sixteen thousand people was held in Anchor Square on March 1st and what has become known as the Petropavlovsk resolution was passed after the "fact-finding" delegation had made its report. Only two Bolshevik officials voted against the resolution. At this meeting it was decided to send another delegation to Petrograd to explain to the strikers and the city garrison of the demands of Kronstadt and to request that non-partisan delegates be sent by the Petrograd workers to Kronstadt to learn first-hand what was happening there. This delegation of thirty members was arrested by the Bolshevik government.

A mass meeting called a "Conference of Delegates" for March 2nd. This conference consisted of two delegates from the ship's crews, army units, the

docks, workshops, trade unions and Soviet institutions. The meeting's 303 delegates endorsed the Petropavlovsk resolution and elected a five-person "Provisional Revolutionary Committee" (later enlarged to 15 members two days later). This committee was charged with organising the defence of Kronstadt, a move decided upon because of the threats of the Bolshevik officials there and the groundless rumour that the Bolsheviks had dispatched forces to attack the meeting. Red Kronstadt had turned against the 'Communist' government and raised the slogan of the 1917

revolution "All Power to the Soviets", to which was added "and not to parties." They termed this revolt the "Third Revolution" and would complete the work of the first two Russian Revolutions in 1917 by instituting a true toilers republic based on freely elected, self-managed, soviets.

The Communist Government responded with an ultimatum on March 2nd. This asserted that the revolt had "undoubtedly been prepared by French counterintelligence". They argued that the revolt had been organised by ex-Tsarist officers led by ex-General Kozlovsky (who had, ironically, been placed in the fortress as a military specialist by Trotsky). This was the official line throughout the revolt.

During the revolt, Kronstadt started to re-organise itself from the bottom up. The trade union committees were re-elected and a council of trade unions formed. The Conference of Delegates met regularly to discuss issues relating to the interests of Kronstadt and the struggle against the Bolshevik government (specifically on March 2nd, 4th and 11th). Rank and file Communists left the party in droves, expressing support for the revolt and its aim of

"all power to the soviets and not to parties." About 300 Communists were arrested and treated humanely in prison (in comparison, at least 780 Communists left the party in protest of the actions it was taking against Kronstadt and its general role in the revolution). Significantly, up to one-third of the delegates elected to Kronstadt's rebel conference of March 2nd were Communists.

The Kronstadt revolt was a non-violent one, but from the start the attitude of the authorities was not one of negotiation but of delivering an ultimatum: either come to your senses or suffer the consequences. Indeed, the Bolsheviks issued the threat that they would shoot the

rebels "like partridges" and took the families of the sailors hostage in Petrograd. Towards the end of the revolt Trotsky sanctioned the use of chemical warfare against the rebels and if they had not been crushed, a gas attack would have been carried out.

There were possible means for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. On March 5th, two days before the bombardment of Kronstadt had begun, anarchists led by Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman offered themselves as intermediates to facilitate negotiations between the rebels and the government. This was ignored by the Bolsheviks. Years later, the Bolshevik Victor Serge (and eye-witness to the events) acknowledged that "[e]ven when the fighting had started, it would have been easy to avoid the worst: it was only necessary to accept the mediation offered by the anarchists (notably Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman) who had contact with the insurgents. For reasons of prestige and through an excess of authoritarianism, the Central Committee refused this course."

The refusal to pursue these possible means of resolving the crisis peacefully is explained by the fact that the decision to attack Kronstadt had already been made. Basing himself on documents from the Soviet Archives, historian Israel Getzler states that by "5 March, if not earlier, the Soviet leaders had decided to crush Kronstadt. Thus, in a cable to . . . [a] member of the Council of Labour and Defence, on that day, Trotsky insisted that 'only the seizure of Kronstadt will put an end to the political crisis in Petrograd.'"

As Alexander Berkman noted, the Communist government would "make no concessions to the proletariat, while at the same time they were offering to compromise with the capitalists of Europe and America." While happy to negotiate and compromise with foreign governments, they treated the workers and peasants of Kronstadt (and the rest of Russia) as the class enemy!

The revolt was isolated and received no external support. The Petrograd workers were under martial law and could take little or no action to support Kronstadt (assuming they refused to believe the Bolshevik lies about the uprising). The Communist government started to attack Kronstadt on March 7th. The first assault was a failure. "After the Gulf had swallowed its first victims," Paul Avrich records, "some of the Red soldiers... began to defect to the insurgents. Others refused to advance, in spite of threats from the machine gunners at the rear who had orders to shoot any wavers. The commissar of the northern group reported that his troops wanted to send a delegation to Kronstadt to find out the

insurgents' demands." After 10

days of constant attacks the Kronstadt revolt was crushed by the Red Army. On March 17th, the final assault occurred. Again, the Bolsheviks had to force their troops to fight. On the night of 16-17 March, for example, the Bolsheviks "arrested over 100 so-called instigators, 74 of whom he had publicly shot." Once the Bolshevik forces finally entered the city of Kronstadt "the attacking troops took revenge for their fallen comrades in an orgy of bloodletting." The next day, as an irony of history, the Bolsheviks celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Paris Commune.

The repression did not end there. According to Serge, the "defeated sailors belonged body and soul to the Revolution; they had voiced the suffering and the will of the Russian people"

yet "[h]undreds of prisoners were taken away to Petrograd; months later they were still being shot in small batches, a senseless and criminal agony".

The Soviet forces suffered over 10,000 casualties storming Kronstadt. There are no reliable figures for the rebels loses or how many were later shot by the Cheka or sent to prison camps.

The figures that exist are fragmentary. Immediately after the defeat of the revolt, 4,836

Kronstadt sailors were arrested and deported to the Crimea and the Caucasus. When Lenin heard of this on the 19th of April, he expressed great misgivings about it and they were finally sent to forced labour camps in the Archangelsk, Vologda and Murmansk regions.

Eight thousand sailors, soldiers and civilians escaped over the ice to Finland. The crews of the Petropavlovsk and Sevastopol fought to the bitter end, as did the cadets of the mechanics school, the torpedo detachment and the communications unit. A statistical communiqué stated that 6,528 rebels had been arrested, of whom 2,168 had been shot (33%), 1,955 had been sentenced to forced labour (of whom 1,486 received a five year sentence), and 1,272

were released. A statistical review of the revolt made in 1935-6 listed the number arrested as 10,026 and stated that it had "not been possible to establish accurately the number of the repressed." The families of the rebels were deported, with

Siberia considered as "undoubtedly the only suitable region" for them.

After the revolt had been put down, the Bolshevik government reorganised the fortress.

While it had attacked the revolt in the name of defending "Soviet Power" Kronstadt's newly appointed military commander "abolish[ed] the [Kronstadt] soviet altogether" and ran the fortress "with the assistance of a revolutionary troika" (i.e. an appointed three man committee). Kronstadt's newspaper was renamed. The victors quickly started to eliminate all traces of the revolt. Anchor Square became "Revolutionary Square" and the rebel battleships Petropavlovsk and Sevastopol were renamed the Marat and the Paris Commune, respectively.

Kronstadt was a popular uprising from below by the same sailors, soldiers and workers that made the 1917 October revolution. The Bolshevik repression of the revolt can be justified in terms of defending the state power of the Bolsheviks but it cannot be defended in terms of socialist theory. Indeed, it indicates that Bolshevism is a flawed political theory, which cannot create a socialist society, but only a state capitalist regime based on party dictatorship.

This is what Kronstadt shows above all else: given a choice between workers' power and party power, Bolshevism will destroy the former to ensure the latter.

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